Bird Flu....What's Up in Connecticut?

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Connecticut, along with other states and the federal government, is actively monitoring and preparing in the event that "bird flu" is discovered in North America. "Bird flu" (actually, the highly pathogenic H5N1 form of avian influenza virus), which has been found in some Asian and European countries, has not been detected in North America. Surveillance for HPAI H5N1 has been ongoing for several months in Alaska and Canada and began recently in the mainland United States, including Connecticut.

Surveillance efforts are focused on sampling live and dead birds for the presence of the virus. Nationwide, states are cooperating with federal agencies to test wild birds. Monitoring will concentrate on species likely to come in contact with birds from Asia or Europe where HPAI H5N1 has been detected in wild birds.

In Connecticut, a variety of water bird species have been selected for monitoring based on their migratory patterns and potential to carry the virus. The DEP Wildlife Division has already tested a sample of resident Canada geese and did not find any HPAI H5N1. Currently, the Division is trapping and testing shorebirds, focusing on semi-palmated sandpipers, dunlins, sanderlings, and black-bellied plovers. This effort will continue through the fall, when monitoring of several duck species will begin. The Division will be testing resident mallards when they are trapped and banded in the fall and also will be collecting hunter-killed greater scaup ("broad bills or blue bills"), brant, and long-tailed ducks (formerly known as old squaw). Waterfowlers wanting to donate birds for testing can contact Min Huang, Migratory Game Bird Project Leader at min.huang@po.state.ct.us or 860-642-4869.

Sportsmen who hunt birds have expressed a variety of concerns to the Wildlife Division regarding bird flu. At this time, there is no need to be concerned about hunting and consuming wild birds or pheasants. Suggestions and common sense precautions that hunters should take when handling any dead birds can be found at the CT Flu Watch website (www.ct.gov/ctfluwatch). This site also provides information on the bird testing program, test results, and "everything you ever wanted to know" about bird flu.

Sportsmen, birders, and the general public can help the Wildlife Division monitor the health of Connecticut's wild bird populations by reporting any die-offs of birds that are observed. Keep in mind that waterfowl (ducks, geese, swans), wading birds (herons, egrets, etc.), and shorebirds (terns, gulls, plovers) are the most likely carriers of HPAI H5N1. Although other species of birds are not likely carriers of the virus, the Division is still interested in information about die-offs involving multiple birds of any species. If you observe several birds (5 or more) that have died at a location all at once or over several days, please report that information either by calling 211 or going to the Wild Bird Mortality Reports section of the CT Flu Watch website.

The DEP and other state and federal government agencies are closely monitoring bird flu. If H5N1 does arrive in the United States or Connecticut, there will be a prompt response to any bird die-offs and substantial efforts to contain its spread.

Questions Concerning Avian Influenza (AI)

Are humans at risk to contract H5N1 from wild birds?

There are *no* documented cases of human H5N1 disease resulting from contact with wild birds. The only documented cases of transmission to humans from birds are from poultry and direct contact with infected birds.

What types of wild birds are most commonly affected?

Waterfowl (ducks, geese, swans), waterbirds (egrets, herons, etc.), and shorebirds (terns, gulls, etc.) are the species that are most closely associated with any type of avian influenza, including the H5N1 strain. Other birds are not likely carriers of AI.

What is the difference between "low pathogenic" or "highly pathogenic" avian influenza?

There are over 100 known variations of "bird flu." The designation of low or highly pathogenic avian influenza refers to the potential for these viruses to kill domestic poultry. The designation of "low pathogenic" or "highly pathogenic" does not refer to how infectious the viruses may be to humans. Most strains of avian influenza are not highly pathogenic and cause few signs in infected wild birds. In poultry, however, low pathogenic strains can mutate into a highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) strain that causes extremely contagious, severe illness and often death in poultry.

How could H5N1 arrive in North America?

H5N1 could be transported through virus-contaminated articles or by illegally imported birds or bird products. Wild birds could bring the virus into North America during migration. Migratory birds, particularly waterfowl and shorebirds, cross the Bering Sea between Alaska and Asia during seasonal migrations to and from breeding and wintering areas. While in Asia, migratory birds could become infected with H5N1 and then migrate to North America.

Are poultry flocks at risk?

The Connecticut Department of Agriculture maintains a monitoring system for AI in poultry. This system includes: inspection and testing of flocks, testing of sick poultry, required reporting by veterinarians and laboratories, and sharing information with neighboring states and the U. S. Department of Agriculture. Commercial poultry farms follow strict procedures to prevent contact between wildlife and poultry.

What are the symptoms of AI in wild birds?

Most strains of AI are asymptomatic in wild birds. There are no definitive symptoms of birds infected with H5N1 nor are there definitive gross lesions associated with wild birds.

How is H5N1 spread from bird to bird?

H5N1 can be spread through oral contact with fecal matter, saliva, and nasal discharges of infected birds.

Are pets or other animals at risk for H5N1 infection?

Pets and dogs used in bird hunting are not considered at risk because there have been no documented cases of the H5N1 virus infecting dogs. Dog owners should consult their veterinarian for more information about influenza in pets.

Handling or Disposal of Dead Birds

What should I do if I find dead birds on my property?

At this time the DEP is following its normal protocol for dead bird

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testing. That is, birds will be tested if several birds die at the same location at one time or over several days. You can submit information regarding dead birds to the state's Bird Mortality Reporting website at www.ct.gov/ctfluwatch. This site will be constantly monitored and if birds that you report warrant testing, you will be contacted.

What is the recommended method for disposing dead birds that will not be submitted for testing?

Avoid direct contact with dead birds. Wear gloves or use a shovel to place birds in a plastic bag. If you do not have gloves, put your hand inside a plastic bag, grab the bird through the bag and pull the bag back over your hand. Tie the bag, place into another plastic bag and tie that bag as well. Dead birds can be disposed of by burying or discarding in the trash. Always wash hands thoroughly after disposal.

Why isn't the state interested in testing one or a few dead birds?

Current knowledge of the effect of the disease on wild birds indicates that outbreaks detected in wild waterbird populations will likely involve the death of a large number of these species. Surveillance of dead birds as an early detection measure is best accomplished by focusing on significant mortality events in wild birds as opposed to individual birds people may come upon or find on their property.

If H5N1 is found in wild birds, will there be an effort to destroy them all?

No. The World Health Organization and Animal Health authorities throughout the world do not believe that culling wild birds is an effective means to control AI. The best way to curb the spread of the disease is to limit human contact with infected birds.

Contact with Birds

Are Canada geese a potential carrier of H5N1?

Yes. However, Canada geese are poor carriers of H5N1.

Is it safe to swim in areas where geese are congregated?

With regards to H5N1, there is no clear answer at this time. The state will continue to review new information on this issue and if H5N1 occurs in or near Connecticut, additional information will be provided to the public. Also, be aware that high concentrations of geese can cause elevated coliform bacteria counts resulting in temporary local closures of swimming areas. Always check to be sure the area has not been closed for swimming.

I regularly feed the ducks and geese at the local park. Should I stop doing this? Am I at risk for H5N1 if I continue?

Feeding of waterfowl is discouraged, regardless of any concern about H5N1. Feeding concentrates birds and increases the risk of disease transmission. The DEP Wildlife Division continues to discourage the public feeding of waterfowl. Several towns have passed no-feeding ordinances. People who continue to feed waterfowl are not at high risk for H5N1, but should thoroughly wash their hands following these activities.

Should I stop feeding the birds that come to my feeder?

No. H5N1 primarily affects and is carried by species associated with water. The types of birds that are attracted to backyard feeders are not considered at risk to carry or be affected by H5N1.

AI and Hunting

Are pheasants susceptible to AI?

To date, pen-raised or wild pheasants have not been implicated in AI outbreaks in the United States, although they are susceptible and could potentially play a role in disease transmission. Routine disease testing of pheasants has occurred for many years in Connecticut and has never detected AI.

Should pheasant hunters be concerned about birds they harvest this fall?

Pheasants encountered by hunters are commercially raised in large outdoor flight pens. These facilities are enclosed with netting that typically excludes interaction with migratory waterfowl or other waterbirds most likely to carry HPAI. Hunters should always use standard precautions (see below) when field dressing and preparing game for consumption.

Will Connecticut continue to stock pheasants on public hunting areas this fall?

Yes. There is no reason to discontinue pheasant stocking at this time. All commercial suppliers will be closely monitored as part of the increased AI surveillance program in Connecticut. However, if H5N1 is discovered at any facility that provides pheasants for the DEP, the facility would be placed under strict quarantine and unable to supply pheasants for the stocking program.

Should waterfowl or turkey hunters be concerned? What precautions should they take when handling dead ducks and geese?

The following suggestions are common sense precautions that hunters should follow when hunting:

1. Do not handle birds that are obviously sick or birds found dead.
2. Keep your game birds cool, clean, and dry.
3. Do not eat, drink, or smoke while cleaning your birds.
4. Use rubber gloves when cleaning game.
5. Wash your hands with soap and water or alcohol wipes after dressing birds.
6. Clean all tools and surfaces immediately afterward; use hot soapy water, then disinfect with a 10% chlorine bleach solution.
7. Cook game meat thoroughly (165°F) to kill disease organisms.

How can hunters and the general public help?

You can help the DEP Wildlife Division monitor the health of Connecticut's wild bird populations by reporting die-offs (See earlier question on "What should I do if I find dead birds on my property?). Also, during the upcoming hunting seasons, donations of certain species for testing (e.g., brant, greater scaup, and long-tailed ducks or "old squaw") will greatly assist in the monitoring efforts. Contact Min Huang at Min.Huang@po.state.ct.us or 860-642-4869, if you are interested in contributing harvested waterfowl.

More Information about Avian Influenza

National Wildlife Health Center: www.nwhc.usgs.gov
United States Department of Agriculture: www.usda.gov
The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: www.cdc.gov
Scientific Information on AI: www.fws.gov/migratorybirds/issues/AvianFlu/WBAvianFlu.htm

The official U.S. government website for information on pandemic flu and avian influenza: http://pandemicflu.gov/

Quick Facts About Avian Influenza

Avian influenza (AI) is an infectious disease of birds. Low pathogenic forms of AI, which pose no problem to the birds, are common in wild bird populations.

Aquatic birds, such as waterfowl, shorebirds and wading birds, are considered the natural reservoir of this virus. However, the AI virus usually does not cause disease in waterfowl or shorebirds.

A highly pathogenic form of this disease, HPAI H5N1 (usually referenced in the media as H5N1) has caused mortality in domestic poultry and some wild species of ducks, geese, egrets, herons, and gulls in Asia and Eastern Europe.

At present, H5N1 is a bird disease, and only rarely causes illness in people. As such, the human health risk from H5N1 under usual circumstances is extremely low. Transmission to humans has occurred principally from very close contact with domestic poultry.

Highly pathogenic H5N1 avian influenza has not yet been found in North America. There is a concern, however, that H5N1 will be detected in North America in the future.

Wild birds are currently being monitored for the presence of H5N1 in the U.S. and testing of wild birds in Connecticut began in mid-July.